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ABSTRACT

In two previous studies, language learner behavior in which the learner tries to underproduce a certain second-language (L2) structure is termed "avoidance." The current analysis examines whether this is an appropriate term. Avoidance is defined as a genuine strategy resulting from the learner's realization that particular forms of input data are avoided simply because they are difficult to reorganize in the output, and an alternative strategy is used to fill the gap. An attempt is made to identify the kinds of knowledge that may lead to non-use of the structure, or to its use with errors. One of the accounts, particularly of the passive in the case of Arabic-speaking learners of English, is reconsidered in light of this characterization and of the frequency differences in Arabic and English passives. It is concluded that the results of one earlier study are misleading and contradictory, due to a poor understanding of the phenomenon of avoidance, a problem left unsolved in the other study, and focus is placed instead on the phenomenon of "delay," which suggests some knowledge of the form in question, and "intuition" or total knowledge of the avoided form. Contains 9 references. (MSE)

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Avoidance or Some Other Strategy: A Case for the Passive in Arabic and English[1]

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INTRODUCTION

This article discusses whether avoidance is an appropriate term to describe the linguistic behaviour in which the learner tries to underproduce a certain L2-structure (Schachter 1974, Kleinmann 1977, 1978). The term is defined as a genuine strategy resulting from the learner's realization that particular forms of input data are avoided simply because they are difficult to reorganize in the output, and thus an alternative strategy is employed to fill the gap. Yet this does not imply 'ignorance' of the avoided form, as misinterpreted by James (1980)[2]. Rather, the learner is said to have some sort of knowledge because it is obvious that one cannot avoid what one does not know (Seliger 1989). Hence, an attempt will be made to identify the sorts of knowledge that may lead to the nonuse of a given L2-structure, or to its use but with erroneous manifestations, since recent research has shown that even Schachter's original study provides inadequate insights into avoidance (Kamimoto *et al.* 1992). Further, Kleinmann's account, particularly of the passive in the case of Arabic learners of English, will be reconsidered in the light of this identification and the frequency differences in the passive between Arabic and English. The article does not, of course, claim to provide an alternative methodology for the exploration of avoidance, as the problem of defining the phenomenon in linguistics terms as I have been doing in this paper still remains. It may well be the case with Schachter and Kleinmann's data that the learner's

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internalised knowledge of the pragmatic limitations of a given structure in L1 may actively dissuade them fro producing its counterpart in L2. Whether one should call this avoidance or some other strategy is a highly controversial issue.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL REALITY OF THE PHENOMENON

First and foremost, avoidance, as defined by behaviourists, should be perceived as a potentially positive strategy in the sense that it constitutes a necessary precondition for successful behaviour (i.e. learning). Avoidance, in and of itself, may seem negative to some L2-acquisition researchers simply because it involves 'negative' contingencies and 'passive' behaviour towards aversive situations.

In seventeenth-century philosophy the Cartesian version of dualism classified human behaviour into two classes: **involuntary actions** (or reflexes) which normally proceed in response to external stimuli; and **voluntary actions** which do not have to be triggered by external stimulation, but occur as a reflection of the individual's conscious choice to act in a certain way. From this version arose two central issues concerning the human mind as a nonphysical entity generating the 'physical movements' in voluntary behaviour. First, the **contents of the mind**: Descartes attributed some of these contents directly to sense experience, and others to certain ideas that are both innate and independent from worldly experience (nativism). In contrast, Locke maintained that all ideas were acquired directly or indirectly through experience after birth; the mind was thus considered to come into being as a tabula rasa (empiricism). Second, **the workings of the mind**: Descartes believed that the mind did not operate in a predictable and systematic manner in accordance with discoverable laws. On the other hand, Hobbes, who denied neither the Cartesian version of dualism nor its particular stress on the mind's constant control over voluntary behaviour, contended that the mind functioned as predictably and lawfully as reflex mechanisms. The crucial point here is Hobbes' identification of this constant control with 'pursuit of pleasure and *avoidance* of pain', a seemingly unavoidable principle that was recognized as one variant of a more general principle called hedonism (cf. Domjan and Burkhard 1993:4f). As a mere fact of life, this principle

is still applicable to normalize instantaneously the way the mind 'initiates' voluntary behaviour, leaving behind the reverse direction (i.e. avoidance of pleasure and pursuit of pain) to abnormal conditions such as masochism.

Recall for the moment that the learner avoids a given L2-structure because he/she finds it difficult (i.e. painful) to process. Had the learner tried to utilize contumaciously an L2-structure known to be difficult/painful at a certain stage of learning, he/she would have behaved in a linguistically masochistic way at that stage of learning.

Seen as one type of instrumental aversive control, avoidance conditioning tends to increase the performance of target bearing, viz. the occurrence of instrumental behaviour. In such a case the organism learns how to minimize expected contact with aversive stimulation, a fact of life that affects all sorts of behaviour, including language learning where the occurrence of instrumental behaviour is seen in terms of a **temporary compensation** to steer clear of a negative contingency between what the learner **ought to do** and the aversive situation created by the avoided form. One must be extremely cautious not to confuse avoidance strategies with the escape strategies that may precede but may not follow them, even though both are types of instrumental aversive control (or negative reinforcement). Escape strategies, the simplest instances of negative reinforcement, dictate that the aversive stimulus (S) is continuously present but can be *terminated* by the instrumental response (R); whereas in the case of avoidance the aversive S is 'scheduled' to occur sometime in the future, and is thus *prevented* or *delayed* by the instrumental R (Domjan and Burkhard 1993:137f).

More explicitly, people escape from aversive circumstances which are already present, but avoid **potential** aversive circumstances that have not yet been present. Avoidance, therefore, presupposes a sufficiently unmistakable force of prediction, an inner force which enables the avoider to successfully realize the extent of the affective state (pain, fear, etc.) when the aversive S is likely to occur. Prevention or delay of this occurrence is evidence of the avoider's **intuitive knowledge** of both

the situation created by the aversive S and the *natural R* replaced by the *instrumental R* through the avoidance trial. In language learning this means intuitive knowledge of both the avoided structure and the aversive context which requires its use. The *natural R* is the avoided structure itself and the *instrumental R* is the alternative strategy (i.e. paraphrase) that the learner resorts to for filling the gap. Given the important distinction between escape (termination of aversive Ss) and avoidance (prevention or delay of aversive Ss), a further distinction must then be made between prevention and delay to illustrate the positive role of avoidance in social practice and language learning respectively. While **prevention** may well entail *habituation* of the avoidance trial whereby the possibility of producing the natural R decreases, **delay** implies *sensitization* of the natural R, and thus its *activation*, at a later stage, particularly when the aversiveness of the S that triggers the avoidance trial is overpowered. Clearly, the former type of avoidance would result in *permanent* attempts to prevent difficulty/pain in social practice, and the latter in temporary attempts to delay difficulty/pain in language learning.

It is therefore the implication of **delay** that must be understood as the ultimate mechanism underlying the avoidance of a given L2-structure. Whether or not this implication was meritorious or desirable was not an issue for Schachter, Kleinmann, and others, since the learner's **intuitive knowledge** of the avoided items or rules was not explained in any perceivable way.

Recall, again, that delay suggests intuitive knowledge of both the avoided structure and the aversive context which requires its use. Now if the learner's nonuse of a given L2-structure can indeed be called avoidance, then this would entail his/her intuitive knowledge of both the linguistic and pragmatic properties of that structure.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL REALITY OF THE PHENOMENON

By **intuitive knowledge** I mean a direct relation between the learner's mind and the avoided structure as perceived unambiguously. The term 'intuition' in this sense is familiar in rationalist philosophy, particularly in the sense intended by Bergson, where **intuitive knowledge** is seen as

a mental process of knowing something as it is in itself. Bergson contrasts this process with what is called 'intellect' or **intellectual knowledge**, a further mental process which helps manipulate the thing being talked about (its form, meaning, etc.) for intentional purposes of action. That is, the capacity of 'intellect' is *practical*, whereas the capacity of 'intuition' is *impractical*[3].

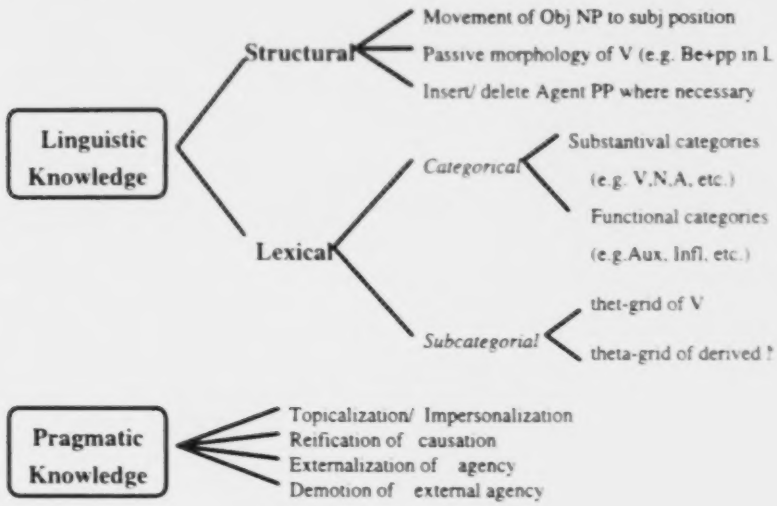
To know an L2-structure intuitively is therefore to have *total* knowledge of the linguistic and pragmatic properties that are incorporated in that structure as an entity existing exclusively for its *epistemological* value. The temporary and necessary abstraction of this entity from the *practical* capacity of 'intellect' may well explain why the context, which requires the use of that L2-structure, sparks off aversive difficulty/pain, and subsequently an avoidance trial. This is because the abstraction process as such is simply a mental dissociation of the learner's intuitive knowledge of the L2-structure from its 'absolute certainty', which is attainable only in 'intellect'. Furthermore, 'absolute certainty', whose function is to verify intuitive knowledge via *manipulating* the **object** of this knowledge for intentional purposes of action, may also explain why the learners (if they did in fact perform avoidance in Schachter's data at least) tend to produce the L2-structure (i.e. the object of 'intuition') only when they are **sure** of its nonerroneous reorganization. If this is correct, then one would conclude that avoidance of an L2-structure occurs when intuitive knowledge of that structure is abstracted from anything contributed by 'intellect', simply because this abstraction would be the source of aversive difficulty/pain in the reorganization process. Conversely, aversive difficulty/pain, and therefore avoidance, would no longer be experienced when both 'intuition' and 'intellect' interact for the reorganization process; and, in such a case, the production trial cannot be taken as a reflection of the learner's 'linguistically masochistic' behaviour.

As mentioned above, the relation between 'intuition' and the avoided L2-structure is to be seen as a sort of *total* knowledge existing exclusively for its epistemological value; *total* in the sense that the production trial, via the functioning of 'absolute certainty', unveils the

linguistic and pragmatic representations of the structure with no erroneous manifestations from an L2-perspective. If, however, significantly frequent production trials reveal incorrect manifestations, then 'intuition' of the structure is simply a sort of partial knowledge, and thus the subsequent underproduction trials cannot be ascribed to avoidance.

Let us now reconsider Kleinmann's account of the passive construction, for instance, in the light of this exposition. On the basis of a contrastive analysis (CA) of the passive in L1-Arabic and L2-English, Kleinmann predicted that the Arabic learners of English would experience difficulty with this structure. The assumption was that, through the learners' exposure to indirect preference assessment task, such difficulty would manifest itself in avoidance which 'could not be attributed to a lack of knowledge' (Kleinmann 1977:97). For him, the presence of knowledge of the passive was initially established by means of comprehension testing coupled with measurements of affective variables such as *confidence* (cf. 'absolute certainty' above), *anxiety*, and *motivation*. All these linguistic and psychological procedures were thus administered to show that avoidance trials were predictable, and that production trials were conditioned by the affective variables just mentioned. This in principle is not a conceptual deviation from the general definition of the 'avoidance-production' dichotomy: if the learners did prove total comprehension of the 'avoided' English passive, then total knowledge of this structure (in the sense discussed here) would occupy their 'intuitive' mind in a form that may be described by the linguist explicitly as in Figure 1.

Figure 1: An explicit description of intuitive knowledge of the passive construction



It is therefore intuitive knowledge of *all* the principles along with the correct values of the parameters that have been fixed which interact for passive-formation and its pragmatic import. However, Kleinmann's limited method of comprehension testing indicates nothing but the learners' elicited L2-responses to a limited set of stimuli (4 pictures for the passive), which may at the same time elicit L1-responses *internally* as filtering devices, given the establishment of most simplified crosslinguistic similarities between L1 and L2 in the comprehension process. Although the elicitation task was 'successful' in terms of the method conducted, comprehension of the passive within these limitations could in no way illuminate the learners' intuitive knowledge (cf. Figure 1), if it really existed exclusively for its epistemological value. After all, the relatively high frequency of erroneous production trials (Kleinmann reported that 76% of the trials were erroneous) is proof enough that *total* knowledge in the sense discussed above did not

exist. Consequently, *partial* knowledge of the passive cannot be taken as a prerequisite for detecting avoidance.

A further problem with Kleinmann's study stems from the a *priopri* correlation between avoidance and the CA-prediction of difficulty. How could one make possible such a correlation with no empirical (i.e. a *posteriori*) notion of its 'repercussions'? (Schachter herself did not address this issue at first; she 'discovered' it only later (cf. Kamimoto et al. 1992:257).) Although it is possible to predict difficulty on the basis of parametric variation between L1 and L2, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to initially establish whether such difficulty would lead to avoidance or to error-making. Thus to account for the *already predicted* difficulty in terms of avoidance could only imply that every passive in Arabic, for example, functions as a passive in English and vice versa. For such implication it is not hard to extrapolate a warping streak of fortuitous confirmation: *the learners avoided the structure whenever they perceived L1-L2 variation via an internal CA!* If this were true, then the L1-passive would provide the input to what Chomsky (1986) terms 'canonical structural realization', a process whereby the theta-arguments of V (or derived N) in the L1 are to be canonically realized as syntactic categories (NP, PP, etc.) in the L2. Thus, a Patient-argument, for instance, is to be realized as an NP in the L2 because it is already realized as an NP in the L1. As a result, both L1 and L2 would involve the same principles and parameters shown in Figure 1, but L1-L2 variation would arise from the way such principles and parameters interact for passive-formation in either language, hence the difficulty and the avoidance trials. This analysis, however, may well be relevant but only to the Arabic passives that do in fact function as passives in English, given the learners' intuitive knowledge of the latter. But what of those that do not? The answer to this question would be far from satisfactory without considering the potential frequency differences in this structure between L1 and L2.

It is assumed that Kleinmann based his contrastive analysis on the written variety of the L1 (Classical Arabic/MSA) since the canonical passive that occurs in this variety (e.g. qutila 'was killed (he)') is normally replaced by the morphologically marked reflexive in Colloquial Arabic (e.g. inqatal vs. qutila). In order to show the

frequency differences in the canonical passive between Classical Arabic and English, a method similar to that of Kamimoto et al. (1992) was applied, except that I took different measures which are of importance here. As a standard example of Classical Arabic, the Koran was chosen, and all the canonical passives found in the first nineteen chapters were counted. Then, the same nineteen chapters of each of three respected English versions were examined along five paradigms as illustrated in Table 1. The choice of these English versions was also determined by the L1s of their writers: Dawood (1956/90) is an Arabic scholar, Arberry (1964/90) is an English scholar, and Ali (1934/46) is an Indian scholar.

Table 1: Frequency of passives in the first nineteen chapters of the Koran and three English versions

Version	(A) Total of passives in Arabic	(B) Total of passives in English	(C) Passives in Arabic and English	(D) Passives in Arabic only	(E) Passives in English
N.J. Dawood (1956/90)	531	911	414	117	497
A.J. Arberry (1964/90)	531	929	463	68	466
A.Y. Ali (1934/46)	531	920	437	94 app.18%	483 app.52%

Note that, apart from the morphological variation across L1 and L2 (synthetic vs. analytic, respectively), the canonical passives of paradigms A and B are only those which satisfy the principles and parameters in Figure 1. The striking difference between paradigms A and B shows that approximately 18% of the Arabic passives do not function as passives in English (paradigm D), and that approximately 52% of the English passives do not function as passives in Arabic (paradigm E). This difference alone would account for the Arabic learners' underproduction trials at the English passive in Kleinmann's data. Moreover, the extremely pervasive nonagentive nature of the passives in Arabic (approximately 95%)[4] tends to minimize considerably the functional divergence across certain L1-actives and L2-agentive passives, since the nonagentive nature of the passives in English is less pervasive (approximately 85%). Surprisingly, all the English passives reported by Kleinmann are agentive and would be far more natural when rendered as actives in Arabic due to the 'instrumental' insertion of Agent-PP in the L2-structure (e.g. *The man was killed **by the woman***), and thus the L1-structure, where the Patient-NP is topicalized and followed by an active, would coincide functionally. For example:

al-rajulu qatalat-hu al-mar?a.
(Gloss: the-man killed(SHE)-him the-woman)
The man, the woman killed him.

A recurrent L1-structure such as the above may well explain why one of Kleinmann's informants responded with an active after a pause intervening between it and a topicalized Patient-NP (cf. Kleinmann 1977:103). For example:

The woman [PAUSE] *The car hit the woman.*

This clearly indicates that the learners were just transferring the more natural activeness of the L1-counterparts, given the significantly low level of frequency overlap between L1-L2 passiveness (paradigm C) as a 'reinforcing' precondition for L1-influence. In other words, the L1-passives that are funtionally equivalent to the L2-passives are not

available for the learners to preceive L1-L2 variation as one possible precondition for the avoidance trials.

Finally, Table 1 demonstrates that Classical Arabic makes far less use of the canonical passive than English, even though the Koran, with its typical embodiment of **impersonal** style, incorporates a comparatively high percentage of canonical passives. That is, if the same method were to be conducted on any other book written in Classical Arabic or MSA and translated into English (or vice versa), the frequency differences would be far more striking than those in Table 1. Yet this does not imply that the Arabic passive forms a subset of the English passive; passivization in Arabic can be expressed via numerous structurally distinct devices, which are beyond the range of this paper.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that the results of Kleinmann's study are both misleading and contradictory due to a poor understanding of the phenomenon of avoidance, a problem that was also left unsolved in Schachter's original work. Hence, the implication of delay discussed above should be underlined as a starting point, otherwise our inquiry about avoidance in SLA research will go awry. This is because delay presupposes some sort of knowledge which is easy to pinpoint but difficult to explain. Thus an attempt was made to identify this knowledge in terms of Bergson's notion of 'intuition', a total knowledge of the avoided form, that is governed by a system of stagnant cognition and impracticalized at a given stage where the workings of 'intellect' are psychologically blocked. This is similar to the L1-speaker's full knowledge of taboo words which are avoided under obvious social constraint, but whose direct use is called upon when they are felt to be most 'expressive' in certain contexts. Comparisons and metaphors suggest nothing else than what is avoided knowingly or what cannot be expressed unknowingly.

NOTES

1. This paper is a somewhat elaborated version based on a previous research project conducted at Dublin City University in 1990-91. I would like to thank Carl James whose wholehearted acceptance of my criticism was the main inspiration for undertaking the project.

2. In his so-called 'standard book', James identifies avoidance strategies as examples of what he calls 'ignorance without interference' (James 1980:22). The book contains a series of further misinterpretations, but I will not discuss them here.

3. Intuition in this sense (i.e. the epistemological, but not the psychological) is one of the necessary conditions specified by some early phenomenologists. Bergson stressed the cogitative nature of intuition as opposed to a spontaneous flash of insight. Yet this mode of 'thinking' is **static** because it enters into what it knows in order to coincide with what is **inexpressible** about it. The capacity of intuition is thus detached from the demands of action (i.e. intellect) at a certain stage (cf. *Introduction to Metaphysics* in his *The Creative Mind*).

4. Out of the 531 Arabic passives (paradigm A) only 28 examples express an overt Agent-PP: 25 with the preposition (min) *'from'*, 2 with the preposition (bi) *'with/by'*, and 1 with the preposition (?inda) *'at'*. It is interesting to see that up to the 14th century *'from'* was used as the principal preposition to denote agency in Old English--with the use of other prepositions such as *'with'*, *'of'*, *'at'*, etc. as secondary. Only later, however, did the preposition 'by' develop diachronically out of the bound morpheme *be-* (cf. Fraser 1987).

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